DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 854 CG 017 331

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TITLE Children of Separating Parents: They Are Not All Alike.
PUB DATE 30 Aug 83
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (91st, Anaheim, CA, August 26-30, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affective Behavior; Children; *Divorce; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; Family Environment; Family Problems; Fatherless Family; *Individual Differences; Males; *Parent Attitudes; Parent Child Relationship; Sex Differences; *Student Adjustment
IDENTIFIERS Parenting Skills

ABSTRACT

Although the events associated with divorce can have negative effects on children who are involved, child maladjustment is not the inevitable consequence of divorce. To investigate the factors which may account for observed variation in children's response to divorce, 46 elementary school children (22 boys, 24 girls), residing with their mothers, were assessed by teachers having no knowledge about the family or child, using Achenbach's Teacher Report Form of the Child Behavior Checklist. The mother and child were separately interviewed about interpersonal relations, the child's perceptions, the functioning of the mother, and status and behavioral variables. An anaylsis of the results showed a high amount of variability in children's behavioral adjustment at school following the marital separation of their parents, particularly for boys. The characteristics of the family and of the separation were related to how the child fared at school. Boys whose parents engaged in less frequent negative interchanges and who saw their fathers often after separation were doing better in school than boys who witnessed overt marital hostility in the home prior to separation. Boys who scored lower on adaptive functioning tended to attribute more blame to themselves for their parents' breakup, to show a fear of abandonment by their families, and to report that the mother frequently made derogatory comments about the father. Finally, mothers whose sons were doing better at school reflected higher performance on a parental skills test and lower stress attributable to the restrictions of the parental role. (BL)

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Children of Separating Parents: They Are Not All Alike

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CG 017331

In R. J. Prinz (Chair), Impact of marital events on children: Perceptions and consequences. Symposium presented at the American Psychological Association Convention, Los Angeles, August 30, 1983.

Children of Separating Parents: They Are Not All Alike

Although the events associated with divorce can have negative effects on the children who are involved, it would be inappropriate to assume that child maladjustment is the inevitable consequence of divorce. Some children in fact do not show behavioral disturbance following their parents' divorce. The clinical question of import is why some children of divorcing parents do show problems while others do not. Unfortunately, the typical research design in the divorce literature, that of comparing a group of children of separated parents to a group of children with intact families, has limited our answers to the question.

The group comparison method has yielded some useful information, but it tends to obscure the problem for two reasons. First, there is an underlying assumption in this approach that children of divorcing parents are a homogeneous population. However, we know this is not the case, for there is as much behavioral variability among children of divorcing parents as there is in the general child population. Second, there is the assumption that the characteristics and events associated with divorce are similar from one family to the next. To the contrary, it is more likely that families differ greatly with respect to the interactions, events, and degree of distress accompanying marital separation and divorce.

An alternative to the comparison of intact and separated families, is the identification of variables which explain outcome variance for children whose parents are divorcing. The study I am presenting today is a preliminary analysis of some of the factors accounting for observed variation in child response to parental divorce. The study

was undertaken with the assumption that a child's behavioral functioning following parental separation is determined in part by what the parents actually do during the separation process. Several variables were examined including conflict before and after separation, the custodial parent's psychological distress, contact among family members after separation, child perceptions, and parenting skills.

The sample included 46 children in total. Families were assessed not less than 2 and not more than 18 months following marital separation. The sample consisted only of elementary school children approximately 7 to 12 years of age. All of the children in the study were residing with their mothers at the time of assessment. Data for boys and girls was analyzed separately in light of sex differences reported in the literature on children of divorce.

The primary criterion measure of child adjustment was Achenbach's (1978) Teacher Report Form of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBC). In order to obtain an independent assessment, teachers completed the CBC without receiving information about the family or the child. Although the CBC includes several subscales, only three were analyzed for this study: (1) Teacher-Reported Adaptive Functioning, which is a composite of work habits, learning, classroom behavior, and happiness; (2) aggression; and, (3) anxiety.

Predictor variables were assessed via separate interviews with mother and child. The predictor variables clustered into four categories: interspousal relations, child perceptions, functioning of (custodial) mother, and status variables.

The interspousal variables focused on interactions before and

after separation. Overt hostility in front of the child prior to separation was assessed via maternal report on the Porter-O'Leary Overt Hostility Scale. Porter and O'Leary(1981) found a relationship between scores on their instrument and child behavior problems in intact clinic families. Overall conflict in the pre-separation relationship was assessed via report by the mother on the Pre-Separation Questionnaire (PSQ). The PSQ, developed and tested in an earlier study of divorcing parents (Davis & Prinz, under review), is an inventory of conflict behaviors likely to occur in the last stages of a deteriorating marriage. Similarly, frequency of negative interactions after separation was assessed via the Separation Questionnaire (SQ) which was also developed and tested in an earlier study (Davis & Prinz, under review). Frequency of contact between spouses (i. e., telephone and face-to-face) was reported by mothers.

The assessment of the child was conducted by an interviewer not exposed to information from the mother. Children's perceptions were assessed using Berg's (Berg, 1979; Kelly & Berg, 1978) Children's Attitudes Toward Parental Separation Inventory; four of the subscales were scored: fear of abandonment, blame of father, blame of mother, and self blame. Children were asked how often they saw their fathers since the parents separated. During the interview, each child was asked how often (recently): (1) the mother said good things about the father, (2) the mother said bad things about the father, (3) the father said good things about the mother, and (4) the father said bad things about the mother.

Four aspects of the mother's functioning were assessed. Overall personal distress was measured using the SCL-90 (Derogatis, Lipman, &

Covi, 1973; Derogatis, Rickels, & Rock, 1976). Sex-role style of the mothers was also assessed because a positive relationship between masculine attributes of the mothers and adjustment of boys in separated families was found in an earlier study (Davis & Prinz, under review). Sex-role style was operationalized by having mothers select 10 preferred home-related activities from a list composed of 10 traditionally masculine activities and 10 traditionally feminine activities. One of the scales from Abidin's (Burke & Abidin, 1980) Parenting Stress Index--Restrictions Imposed by Parental Role--was included in the list of predictor variables. Parental skill level with respect to child management was assessed via O'Dell's (O'Dell, Tarler-Benlolo, & Flynn, 1979) parental skills test (Knowledge of Behavioral Principles Applied to Children) was administered to mothers.

The last group of variables included post-separation family income, educational level of mother, and age of child. It was hypothesized that these three variables would not be related to child adjustment. In fact, that is what we found. For boys and for girls and for all three behavioral dimensions (adaptive functioning, aggression, and anxiety), no significant correlations were obtained for income, mother's education, or child's age. These variables were not included in further analyses.

The remaining 17 predictor variables were entered into stepwise regression analyses to determine the extent of multivariate association with child adjustment at school. Stepwise regression was conducted separately for boys and girls for each of the three behavioral dimensions. The regression procedure was stopped in each

case when a new variable could not account for at least two percent additional variance.

For the boys' sample, multiple correlations were high for all three behavioral dimensions (adaptive functioning, aggression, and anxiety). Each of the prediction equations required a little more than half of the available predictor variables in order to obtain the high prediction, which meant that the composite of several variables, rather than the dominance of a few, accounted for the child adjustment scores. For the girls' sample, adaptive functioning was predicted to the same extent as it was for boys. The multiple correlations for aggression and anxiety, however, were lower for the girls compared to the boys. In the prediction of aggression for girls, only two variables entered into the equation.

Based on the multiple regression results, we came to the following conclusions:

1. There is sufficient variability in children's behavioral adjustment at school following the marital separation of their parents to permit a high multivariate association with the predictor variables.
2. The selected predictor variables, which were assessed independent of functioning at school, were strongly related as a group to the child criterion variables. In other words, the characteristics of the family and of their separation are clearly related to how the child is faring at school.
3. Although prediction was stronger for boys than for girls, demonstrable multiple correlations were obtained for both groups, suggesting that girls do show variation in adjustment to separation.

The strength of the multiple correlations does not tell us anything about the content of the prediction. Let me turn now to the contribution of individual predictor variables. I will use as an example the prediction of adaptive functioning for boys. Ten of the seventeen predictor variables were significantly correlated with adaptive functioning of boys at school. The strongest predictor was the frequency of negative interactions between spouses after separation ($r = -.50$): that is, boys whose parents engaged in less frequent negative interchanges were doing better at school. Overt marital hostility (in front of the child) prior to separation was also significantly associated with child adjustment but to a lesser magnitude ($r = -.36$), while the overall extent of conflict in the pre-separation relationship was not significantly related.

Other variables besides conflict-related ones were significantly associated with adaptive functioning of boys. The boys who saw their fathers more often after the parents separated were doing better at school ($r = .48$). Boys who scored lower on adaptive functioning tended to attribute more blame to themselves for their parents' breakup ($r = -.43$), to show a fear of abandonment by their families ($r = -.42$), and to report that the mother frequently made derogatory but not complimentary comments about the father ($r = .40, -.39$). Finally, mothers whose sons were doing better at school reflected higher performance on the parental skills test ($r = .44$) and lower indications of stress attributable to restrictions of the parental role.

The pattern of results suggests several conclusions regarding the factors which are associated with poorer functioning at school for

boys of divorcing parents:

1. The prediction of the boys' adjustment based on what is going on between the parents is sharpened when we take into account both the nature and the timing of interspouse conflict. Hostile interactions that the boy observes, as opposed to just a general deterioration of the marital relationship, seem to be more strongly associated with child outcome. The recency of the overt conflict (i.e., post-separation versus pre-separation) also appears to be a relevant factor.

2. The mother's knowledge of child management skills, which has little to do with marital separation per se, was related to child functioning following the separation. What this finding suggests is that divorcing families come from the same population as intact families in that parents from both groups vary in their ability to be effective with their children. What the mother is already able to do at the time of the marital separation appears to make a difference in moderating the child's outcome. However, it may well be that parenting ability interacts with the situational characteristics of the marital breakup to produce the child outcome. Mothers with less parenting skill when faced with the difficulties of single parenthood may not be able to help their children through the experience as well. Mothers who exhibit stronger parenting skills, on the other hand, may be able to modulate the effects of a particularly non-amicable divorce.

3. Contact with the noncustodial parent (in this case, father-son) does seem to play a role in the child's adjustment at school. What the data does not resolve, however, is whether frequent contact between father and son has positive effects on the child even if it

results in more frequent hostile interactions between spouses.

4 The child's perceptions of the divorce situation (self-blame, fear of abandonment, recall of one parent's comments about the other) emerged as consistent correlates of problems at school. A child's role in worsening or mitigating the adverse effects of their parents' separation cannot be ignored. Just as parents vary greatly in what they bring to bear in coping with the divorce, children also are diverse. Since they did not choose for their parents to divorce, the children were in a sense randomly assigned to the experience in an arbitrary manner. Some of the children have skills which help them do well despite the divorce of their parents. Child coping style needs to be examined more closely in order to better understand the varied outcomes to divorce.

The findings which I have presented are primarily to illustrate an underutilized tactic of research for the child-divorce area. With the high incidence of divorce (it is becoming almost a normative phenomenon), it is important to stop treating divorce as though it were a singular uniform event and to stop viewing children of divorce as a homogeneous population. Instead, a more fruitful approach is to more fully account for the divergent outcomes found among children of divorcing families.

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CHILDREN OF SEPARATED PARENTS
CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE

LENGTH OF SEPARATION	2 TO 18 MONTHS MEDIAN = 7.5 MOS
WHO INITIATED SEPARATION	MOTHER 52% FATHER 48%
WHO HAS CUSTODY	MOTHER 100%
SOCIOECONOMIC LEVEL	PREDOMINANTLY LOWER MIDDLE CLASS
SEX OF CHILD	22 BOYS 24 GIRLS
CHILD'S AGE	6 YRS 10 MOS TO 12 YRS 9 MOS MEDIAN = 9 YRS 3 MOS

CRITERION VARIABLES

INSTRUMENT: ACHENBACH'S CHILD BEHAVIOR CHECKLIST--TEACHER REPORT

SCORED DIMENSIONS:

ADAPTIVE FUNCTIONING AT SCHOOL
(COMPOSITE OF WORK HABITS, APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR, LEARNING, AND HAPPINESS)

ANXIETY

AGGRESSION

PREDICTOR VARIABLES

INTERSPOUSE

OVERT HOSTILITY IN FRONT OF CHILD PRIOR TO SEPARATION

OVERALL CONFLICT IN RELATIONSHIP PRIOR TO SEPARATION

FREQUENCY OF NEGATIVE INTERACTIONS POST SEPARATION

AMOUNT OF CONTACT BETWEEN SPOUSES POST SEPARATION

CHILD PERCEPTIONS

CHILD FEAR OF ABANDONMENT

CHILD BLAME OF FATHER

CHILD BLAME OF MOTHER

CHILD SELF BLAME

HOW OFTEN CHILD SEES FATHER (POST-SEPARATION)

MOTHER SAYS GOOD THINGS ABOUT FATHER

MOTHER SAYS BAD THINGS ABOUT FATHER

FATHER SAYS GOOD THINGS ABOUT MOTHER

FATHER SAYS BAD THINGS ABOUT MOTHER

FUNCTIONING OF MOTHER

- OVERALL PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS
- PREFERENCE FOR MALE-ROLE ACTIVITIES
- PARENTING STRESS: RESTRICTIONS IMPOSED BY PARENTAL ROLE
- PARENTING SKILL

OTHER VARIABLES

- FAMILY INCOME
- EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF MOTHER
- CHILD'S AGE

PREDICTION OF SCHOOL BEHAVIOR FOR BOYS (N = 24)
STEPWISE REGRESSION

	MULTIPLE R	PERCENTAGE OF VARIANCE	NO. OF VARIABLES
ADAPTIVE FUNCTIONING	.97	94%	9
AGGRESSION	.95	90%	10
ANXIETY	.92	85%	9

PREDICTION OF SCHOOL BEHAVIOR FOR GIRLS (N = 22)
STEPWISE REGRESSION

	MULTIPLE R	PERCENTAGE OF VARIANCE	NO. OF VARIABLES
ADAPTIVE FUNCTIONING	.94	89%	9
AGGRESSION	.88	77%	2
ANXIETY	.88	77%	7

SIGNIFICANT CORRELATES OF
ADAPTIVE FUNCTIONING AT SCHOOL FOR BOYS (N = 24)

-.50 **	FREQUENCY OF NEGATIVE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SPOUSES AFTER SEPARATION
.48 **	HOW OFTEN CHILD SEES FATHER (POST-SEPARATION)
.44 **	PARENTING SKILL
-.43 *	CHILD SELF BLAME
-.42 *	CHILD FEAR OF ABANDONMENT
.40 *	MOTHER SAYS GOOD THINGS ABOUT FATHER
-.39 *	MOTHER SAYS BAD THINGS ABOUT FATHER
-.36 *	OVERT HOSTILITY IN FRONT OF CHILD PRIOR TO SEPARATION
-.34 *	PARENTING STRESS: RESTRICTIONS IMPOSED BY PARENTAL ROLE

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$